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TAGS: PREL PGOV SY LE

SUBJECT: FM MU'ALLIM BRIEFS EU AMBASSADORS

Classified By: Charge d'Affaires Kathy Johnson-Casares, per 1.4 b,d.

¶1. (C) Summary: Recently appointed FM Walid Mu'allim provided EU Ambassadors a diplomatic tour d'horizon at a dinner March 7 hosted by the Austrian Ambassador. According to a Hungarian diplomat who attended the dinner, Mu'allim offered no revelations or dramatic changes of course in his remarks on Syria-EU relations, Lebanon, Iran and Iraq, and relations with the U.S. Mu'allim denied the existence of any secret deal with the U.S., describing relation with the U.S.

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as "very bad." He avoided answering questions about any agreement between the SARG and UNIIIC chief Brammertz and on the recent SARG closure of the EU-sponsored Human Rights Center. Mu'allim arrived at the dinner an hour late because he was held up meeting with Spanish FM Moratinos, who stopped briefly at Damascus International Airport on his way back to Europe from Afghanistan. End Summary.

¶2. (C) SARG-EU RELATIONS : At a dinner hosted by the Austrian Ambassador March 7, FM Mu'allim briefed EU Ambassadors (and those from Turkey, Romania, and Bulgaria). According to a readout provided to PolChief by the Hungarian Charge Ferenc Toth, Mu'allim told the diplomats that the SARG is still hopeful that the Association Agreement with the EU would be signed but acknowledged that current prospects for forward progress are not promising. Mu'allim noted that Syria very much wanted to tap into the first-class expertise that EU countries had to offer for the SARG's plans for modernization and reform. He indicated, however, that if the EU did not want to provide Syria with such resources, it would look to others, even if the assistance was not up to the level the Europeans had to offer. On the controversy over the caricatures of the prophet Mohammed, Mu'allim applauded the efforts of a few European countries like Denmark to begin a "dialogue of civilizations" but noted that a cultural dialogue without a political dimension would be insufficient to address the problem.

¶3. (C) LEBANON: Regarding Lebanon, Mu'allim asserted that the SARG wanted improved relations but blamed the current poisonous bilateral atmosphere on anti-Syria incitement in the Lebanese press, especially notable in Walid Jumblatt's attacks on President Asad. According to Mu'allim, Syria has fulfilled its obligations under UNSCR 1559 by withdrawing its forces from Lebanon. Demarcation of the border at Sheba'a farms is only possible after the withdrawal of Israeli forces from there, since otherwise experts would not be able to get into the area. In Mu'allim's view, the Sheba'a Farms demarcation is driven by the issue of Hizballah disarmament. He indicated that the SARG is ready in principle to establish diplomatic relations with Lebanon but is waiting for the

appropriate time.

¶4. (C) IRAN: Mu'allim defended Syria's attempt to reinforce its relations with Iran, noting that this was based on long-standing ties that dated back to the Iran-Iraq war. Syria's neighbors and others had periodically criticized this effort to build good relations with Iran, but such criticisms had repeatedly subsided, for example after the first Gulf War, vindicating SARG policy. According to Ferenc, Mu'allim pointed to widely-expressed fears in the region, especially in the Gulf, about the use of any "military option" to resolve the conflict over Iran's nuclear program, noting the potential it would have to de-stabilize neighboring countries and cause further hikes in the price of oil. Mu'allim made passing reference to Syrian and Egyptian efforts to press for a nuclear-free zone in the Middle East as a reasonable way to address the conflict with Iran.

¶5. (C) IRAQ: Mu'allim stuck closely to the SARG's public position on Iraq, asserting that his government wanted stability there and was making efforts to improve economic and political relations. He also expressed concern about the dangers of increasing sectarianism there.

¶6. (C) RELATIONS WITH THE U.S.: Mu'allim denied the existence of any "secret deal" with the U.S. and acknowledged that bilateral relations were quite bad. He mentioned that the U.S. was not planning to send an Ambassador to replace Ambassador Scobey. He criticized what he described as U.S. policy on Syria that was too heavily influenced by Israel.

¶7. (C) QUESTIONS WITHOUT ANSWERS: Mu'allim was asked about any agreement between the SARG and UNIIIC chief Serge Brammertz and about the closure of the EU Human Rights Center in Damascus. He avoided providing any substantive response to either inquiry.

JOHNSON-CASARES